

UNIVERSAL, PARTICULAR AND INDIVIDUAL

Roughly speaking, a “universal” is what different individual things or particular situations have in common. Human beings, planets, revolutions, etc. have groups of specific properties that make them humans, planets, etc. A useful term for these groups of core properties is “essences.”

As an example, let’s consider the essence of humanity. We are not looking for a definition of “human” or a way to tell if some animal is human. Definitions, like “man is the tool-making animal,” (which doesn’t actually apply just to humans) wouldn’t tell you what makes something human, anymore than wearing a mechanic’s uniform would determine what makes someone an auto mechanic, even if every mechanic wore one.

The Marxist viewpoint is that what makes something human is both biological and social. At any given period in history, social relationships make up part of our nature, and that nature will change when social relations change. In particular, someone’s social class, which is part of his or her social relationships, has powerful and wide-ranging effects. Both the biological and social sides of the human essence are material, however, not something immaterial or merely ideal, as Platonists would say (Platonism was explained in the last issue).

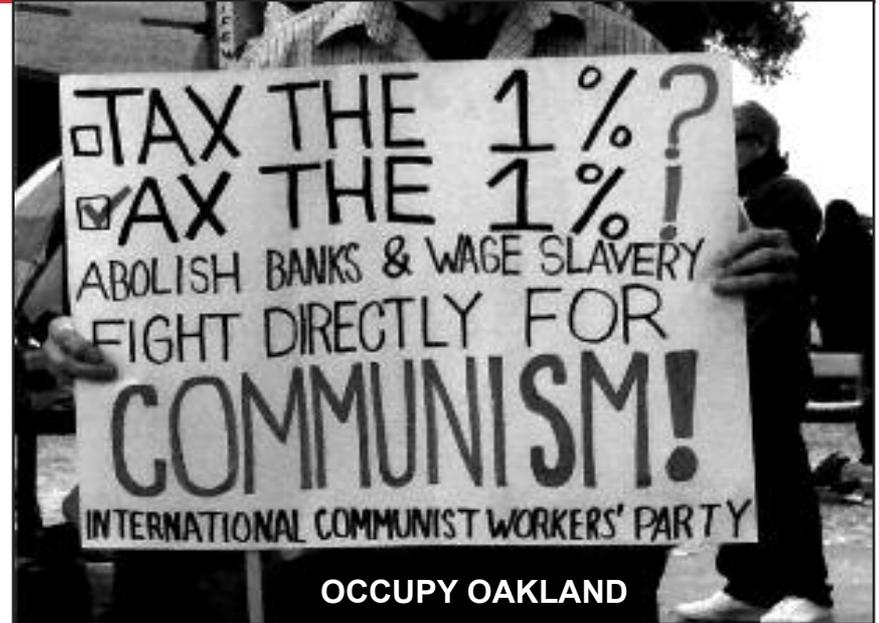
The humanity example shows that the essence of a universal can change over time—it’s a moving target. In the future, when people have grown

up under communist social relationships, everyone will be less competitive and individualistic, and better at cooperation.

Universal and Individual: A Dialectical Relation

Universals depend on individuals and can’t exist without them, since they are the common characteristics in these individuals. Lenin wrote that “Every universal is (a fragment, or an aspect, or the essence of) an individual.” A universal can’t exist unless something has it or at least could have it. If humans had never evolved, there would be no such universal as humanity, but the universal “mammal” would still exist if there were mammals.

Individuals also depend on universals, since universals are the characteristics of individuals and define their relations to other individuals. Earth is a planet with a solid surface, liquid water, and an atmosphere. Each of these properties is a universal, and partly defines which individual thing Earth is. But there is more in an individual than any short list of universals can describe. As Lenin put it, “Every universal only approximately embraces all the individual objects” that have it. Astronomers are now discovering more Earth-



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like planets, and each is different from Earth in some way.

Understanding the universals in individual things is important because the essence of a universal can have big effects. All revolutions have some features in common, like mass mobilization, hatred of the government, etc., that partly determine the course of the revolution. Universals point to necessary connections, like imperialist rivalry causing wars, and they are key parts of theoretical principles and generalizations.

The Right Universals Matter

Some universals do a much better job than others in indicating the capabilities of individuals.

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Social class universals, like worker and capitalist, refer to essential factors that have strong effects, and are more important than other social universals that refer to race, gender or nationality, which reactionary “identity politics” treats as primary.

A big part of scientific investigation is finding the right universals, universals that name the common factors that mainly determine what happens in particular situations and leaves out factors that matter less. Using universals that are too abstract and leave out too much can be especially misleading. It would be a mistake, for example,

to try to understand the prospects of life under capitalism by focusing on human nature. That’s why Marx wrote that his economic studies did not “proceed from man but from a given economic period.”

It would also be a mistake to discuss the fight for communism by talking about revolution in general. The French Revolution replaced the feudal aristocracy with the capitalists, but kept exploitation and class rule. Revolution to destroy capitalism will be different, since destroying class society altogether requires relying on mass understanding of, commitment to, and mobilization for communism.

The right universals, put into the right theories, are vital guides in the fight for communism, but the particular or individual still has more content than universals do. Even a good theory doesn’t fully describe all particular cases, but knowing about those cases can be the basis for improving it. Thus the party needs to learn from many individual workers’ experiences and struggles, and combine them into better knowledge of universals and better theories based on them. The ICWP will play this central role in developing the science of revolution, and use it to lead the working class to communism.